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State of Maine

Educational Department

Rural School Efficiency

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RURAL SCHOOL EFFICIENCY.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the position held by the rural school in the educational system of Maine. This importance is clearly indicated by the fact that of our entire public school enrollment nearly one-half is to be found in the country schools.

Much has been done in the past decade to draw the attention of the people to rural school needs and conditions and to increase the interest in them. It is of supreme importance that this class of schools continue to hold a leading position in the minds of our people and in the study and attention they will give to improvement of all educational conditions. The country school should not be a close imitation of other schools.

In the schools of large towns and cities peculiar problems of administration are encountered. These arise from the necessity of dealing with large numbers of children and with conditions that are, to some extent, artificial.

Some of the methods employed in city schools may possibly be adapted to rural school conditions, but it is a mistake to accept the city school as a pattern for the rural school to copy. The latter presents its own peculiarities and individuality. It should be neither superior nor inferior to any other kind of school. It should be treated as a distinct type. Its special needs should receive attention and it should be made the most effective instrument in its own peculiar field. It is entitled to all the careful study that is given to other classes of schools, but it will be worthier of respect for being itself, rather than a weak imitation of a city school.

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THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY.

Perhaps the relation between the country school and the community is closer than in the case of any other class of schools. It stands often as the only local public institution. Where there is no local church, few amusements, no public library, no local organization of any kind, it is natural that the country community should look to its school to meet some of the needs supplied to villages and towns by these other agencies.

It is highly desirable that the country schoolhouse be used as a center of educational interest for the adult as well as for the youthful portion of the population it serves. Public meetings of various kinds, simple entertainments, lyceums and debating clubs help to dignify the school by making it more useful. The use of the country school, as a distributing center for a branch of the town library, or for one of the traveling libraries provided by the State, serves to give it a new importance as a local institution.

It is often noticed that, in the small community, the daily life of the school is more frequently a subject of conversation than is the case in the community where a larger variety of outside interests divides the attention of the people. Whether this reacts to the advantage of the school depends upon the spirit of the conversation. Constant carping and criticising, even of a mild variety and without a positively hostile intent, cannot fail in the end to injure the efficiency and influence of the school.

There is, however, no greater source of strength to the teacher, nor of inspiration to the pupil, than the kindly words spoken of the school in the home. This vital relation between the school and the community should be recognized by the teacher, the parent and the citizen. Their efforts should be united to strengthen it and make it effective for mutual improvement.

THE COURSE OF STUDY.

Much discussion has been given to the question as to whether it is advisable for the country school to attempt to follow a definite course of study. Much of the uncertainty on this point has been caused by the attempt to follow a course of study in the same manner it would be followed in a closely graded school system.

There is considerable doubt whether this close grading is desirable even in city schools where it has been adopted because of the necessity of dealing with large numbers of children and where system has been carried to an extreme development. In the country school, where no such necessity exists, there is no reason for the adoption of a closely graded system.

There should be, however, in every school, whether city or country, a definitely planned course of study arranging subjects in proper correlation and sequence. Haphazard effort of any kind is sure, in some measure, to fail. School work is in special danger from a procedure of this kind.

Every country school should be conducted upon the basis of certain definite plans. The work of each term and of each year should be a unit. There should be nothing vague nor indeterminate in the teacher's mind in relation either to the purpose of the course or to its results.

The majority of the towns of the State have such definite courses of study for their rural schools. The success with which these courses have been followed proves their helpfulness as well as their possibility. It is earnestly hoped that all school committees will speedily follow the example of these towns and that no country school in the State will attempt to work without definite aim and purpose.

In arranging courses of study for rural schools the main object should be to secure simplicity. The work should be kept very close to essentials. Much drill should be given on fundamental facts and principles. The development of power rather than the acquisition of much information should be the controlling purpose.

The country school should be first of all a common school. High school studies have little place in the average country school course. To place them there is to deprive the elementary school pupils of their just claims, as it is for them that the school primarily exists. High school courses are now so readily available to all pupils who are prepared to take them that there is small excuse for crowding secondary school work into country schools where, at best, it can not be well done.

In the rural school course of study, advantage should be taken of the special opportunities offered to enrich the life of

the country child. His eyes should be opened to the beauties of nature. Certain forms of manual training, domestic science and elementary agriculture would serve to make the country school more attractive to the pupils who attend it and more useful to the community it serves. These subjects, however, • cannot be attempted until there shall be available for the country school a teaching force trained to teach them thoroughly. In these, as well as in other subjects, no good can come of superficial or inadequate treatment. It is not essential that all parts of a given subject be taught. It is absolutely essential, however, that those parts which are presented be taught thoroughly.

SUPERVISION OF THE RURAL SCHOOL.

Much loss has come to the country school because it has not had the benefit of the close supervision that has been available for the schools of cities and large towns.

The frequent changing of teachers, the lack of definite courses and plans, the waste in supplies and text-books are among the factors that reflect the inadequate supervision of rural schools.

There should be placed behind them the same strength of authority that has been found useful to others. They are entitled to the same watchful scrutiny, careful guidance and expert direction that have been found essential to improvement in other business and professional lines. They should be often visited that the work of both teacher and pupil may receive intelligent criticism and encouragement.

These things are not usually possible under a system of supervision that calls for part time service on meager pay. Any superintendent who does all the work necessary to the adequate supervision of rural or other schools does it only at very great personal sacrifice, a sacrifice that few persons can afford to make.

The law, providing for the union of towns for the employment of a superintendent of schools who must be specially fitted for the work and must give all his time to it, is one that holds promise of much good for rural towns. Its general adoption would doubtless be a most powerful factor for the general improvement of rural school opportunities.

CONSOLIDATION AND TRANSPORTATION.

In many of the rural communities of the State there has been a considerable decrease in the school population. The consequent decrease in school enrollment has been so great, in many instances, as to change, entirely, the character of the schools.

Communities that once enrolled in their schools forty or fifty pupils now often find difficulty in keeping the attendance at the meager average of eight required by the law. It is no unusual thing to find schools in which a majority of the classes consist of a single pupil working without any of that enthusiasm and interest inspired by numbers and finding no opportunity for that measurement of power with others so essential to a testing of ability.

The condition thus created has led, in many cases, to the combination of schools. The reasons given for the consolidation of schools under these circumstances, are that the expense of running the small school is too great and that better educational advantages are secured to the pupils.

Of these two reasons, the second is of vastly greater importance. If it is clear that the small school is still a better school and more profitable to the pupils than the larger one, towns are not justified, for a small saving of money, in making combination.

If, however, this combination is to result in superior advantages to the children, it is clearly the duty of the school officials to effect it and of the parents to endorse and support it. No absolute rule is of course applicable to the question of relative value. It is one that must be settled by the conditions prevalent in each community. However, it is generally true that the school of eight, ten, or twelve pupils works at a disadvantage as compared with the school of twenty, or more, pupils whose work can be classified.

Not only are the interest and enthusiasm likely to lag, but it becomes more and more difficult, each year, to secure for these schools and to retain in them the best teaching talent.

Good teachers can command the best paying positions and the town that supports a large number of little schools is usually unable to pay the salaries necessary to retain superior talent.

In close connection with the question of consolidation arises that of transportation of pupils. While the discontinuance of a school does not in itself constitute any claim for conveyance, since the law imposes the obligation of carrying pupils only in cases where it becomes necessary, in the judgment of the school committee, yet it often happens that closing a school creates such a necessity in the cases of, at least, a part of the pupils.

This transportation may be furnished, according as the committee deem necessary, for all, or a part, of the distance between the home and the school. It may appear necessary to furnish it to one child and not to another for the same distance, because of extreme youth or physical disability in the case of the first. It may seem necessary to provide conveyance for certain seasons and on stormy days and not for the pleasant seasons and fine weather. This power of discrimination is placed by the statute entirely with the local school authorities.

Whenever conveyance becomes necessary, it increases the probability of its success if the school authorities exercise extreme care in the choice of conveyance, making certain that it is reasonably comfortable, that it is provided with adequate protection in case of storms and that it is in the hands of a reliable person. Its success will likewise be promoted when provision is made for the proper supervision of the pupils by the teacher, or other reliable person, during the lunch hour.

As it becomes necessary to consolidate schools in order to secure educational efficiency, the interest of the child should be held paramount to every other consideration. School authorities and parents should co-operate so that there will be no sacrifice of the physical well-being of the child, or of his educational privileges. It sometimes happens that it is better to keep open even a very small school, because of the unusual distance to be traveled to another, or the extreme youth of the children. Such conditions the school authorities should and will consider. On the other hand, they should allow no personal nor selfish interest to stand in the way of the superior educational opportunity that may be made possible through school consolidation.

THE RURAL SCHOOL TEACHER.

Not less than in any other class of schools the efficiency of the rural school depends upon the teacher. Given all other factors of a good school and place it in charge of a poor teacher and their excellencies will be to small purpose. A really good teacher will, however, even under very adverse circumstances, give evidence, in the results of her work, of her superior qualities.

Perhaps it is even more essential that the rural school have superior teaching ability at its disposal than the town or city school. In the latter, organization aids the teacher. She is supported by the counsel of principal and associate teachers. She has immediate appeal to a higher authority, in cases of discipline. She is responsible for the teaching of a smaller range of subjects.

The rural teacher must have all classes, from the primary to the high school. She must, to a great extent, deal with and settle at once her own problems of administration and discipline. She must rely more fully upon her own judgment.

These considerations as well as the importance of the rural school itself call for the employment of the best possible teachers for country schools.

Communities are not just to their children when they subject them continually to inexperienced teachers. The practice of putting into country schools persons of only common school training, having no special fitness nor ability, merely because such service can be had at a low price, holds promise only of harm to the schools. It is useless to expect that older boys and girls will remain in the schools, provided they can escape, if they are obliged always to have teachers whose attainments are so meager as not to command respect.

The salaries paid to teachers in the majority of our rural schools are entirely inadequate. If they are permitted to continue at the present rate we must expect a discouraging record of ignorance, illiteracy and inefficiency.

Each town having rural schools as a part of its school system should employ for those schools teachers of special training and fitness. It should, moreover, aim to retain for each school the

teacher who has proved her value. The inducement offered through the increased salary to the teacher who has proved her worth will be amply justified in the larger educational return to the school.

It should, likewise, be a part of the work of the towns to help supply the demand for teachers of better training. From their local high schools should go a constant representation into the State normal schools. The uplift that would come to Maine rural schools, through the substitution of this policy for the present one of making the rural school the training school of inexperience, would be very great. Such a policy cannot, however, be consistently followed until the towns are prepared to pay the larger salary that will command the trained teacher.

The country boys and girls of Maine deserve the best teaching. Neither the communities nor the State can afford to give them less.

THE BUILDING AND ITS EQUIPMENT.

The rapid improvement that has been recently made in the condition of school buildings has been extremely gratifying. Very many communities, however, are still willing to allow their school buildings to remain unfit for occupancy. Systems of heating and ventilation are inadequate. Sufficient attention is not given to lighting. School furniture is antiquated, uncomfortable and unhygienic. Outbuildings are ill kept and indecent. Cloak rooms are not provided. There are no closets for storing supplies and books. In too many cases the textbooks have been neglected and have become unfit for use. There is a failure to supply a reasonable equipment of the necessary school apparatus, such as maps, charts and globes. There are too few books of reference. Often janitor's service is inefficient and the rooms are permitted to become dirty. Too little attention is given to providing the inexpensive ornaments, pictures and casts that make the room a more attractive place for the spending of childhood days. In many instances there continues neglect of the school grounds. There are no suitable places for play. No provision is made for lawns, gardens, shrubbery and trees.

It is a simple and reasonable demand that all these defects be corrected in every school. The highest efficiency of rural edu-

tion in Maine will not be possible until in all our schools a reasonable equipment is provided.

Children often are obliged to go from homes that are well kept, well warmed, properly ventilated and comfortably furnished, from homes where they are carefully shielded from all that will offend, to schoolhouses where conditions quite the opposite prevail. It is a first duty of each parent to use every influence to secure for the country school, as well as for the village and city school, physical conditions that will promote, rather than retard, the educational process.

THE SUPPORT OF THE RURAL SCHOOL.

Not only are the country communities concerned with the welfare of their own schools, but the State as a whole has a vital interest in them.

The country boy may become later a citizen of the larger town or city. The quality of the education he is receiving is to be reflected in the quality of his later citizenship. The fruit of his productive years will be given to another community than the one in which his training is secured.

The city looks constantly to the country to replenish its supply of men and women. Without this supply of citizens from the country it is generally admitted the city would lose in physical and intellectual vigor. The injustice of placing upon smaller and poorer communities the entire cost of educating the children from whose maturity the local community is to receive no direct support is apparent. The State has therefore recognized the justice of the policy of making possible such aid from the State to the local community as will tend to equalize educational opportunity.

On the other hand, any policy that would lead the community to shift from itself the main responsibility of educating its own children would be repugnant to the sturdy sense of independence of our people. The people of the local town should understand that they themselves are mainly responsible for the character of their educational system. Schools can be good only when they have behind them this sense of responsibility. If schools are poor it is usually for the reason that the sense of the community permits inferiority. Certain main requirements

can be enforced by the law, but the real spirit of educational progress is not to be secured by statute, it is to be found only in the people. If it is not present there it is likely to be found wanting in the schools.

SUMMARY.

The essential points of rural school efficiency are as follows:

1. A well trained and adequately paid teaching force.
2. Well built schoolhouses with suitable grounds and with a reasonable equipment of all the tools of education.
3. Professional guidance under expert and business-like supervision.
4. A simple and definitely arranged course of study.
5. Community interest, co-operation and support.
6. Reasonable consolidation of the smallest schools, under conditions that will promote the educational welfare of the pupils concerned.

The welfare of the children enrolled in these schools depends upon the attention given by the people of Maine's rural towns to these considerations. Whether the future of one of our most important classes of educational institutions is to be worthy of its honorable past will be answered by the response given by our people to its actual and pressing needs.

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